

# **all that I want is to get lost in your shallows** by **melonpen**

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**Summary:**

She was like nothing Ben had ever seen. Her hair was the vibrant color of coral, but with an impossible shine to it. The sun, almost, but that was wrong for the sun had no life in its ceaseless burning and, opposed to that, the woman seemed to glow with life. Burning with life.

And she had two legs.

There wasn't anything abnormal about that as most humans, all humans as far as Ben were aware, had these limbs to aid their lives through walking and jumping. Just as fish had their tails to swim through the dark, cold depths of the ocean. But, as he watched her climb out to the edge of the rocky coast, skirt hiked up to let her feet and calves dangle into the foamy water, Ben desperately wished he had the former as well.



# **all that I want is to get lost in your shallows**

## **Author's Note:**

this is tagged, but just so we're all clear, trigger warning for heavily implied/referenced spousal abuse between Tom and Beverly, and a single reference to Alvin Marsh. If I have done something offensive in my portrayal in this fic, please let me know.

She was like nothing Ben had ever seen. Her hair was the vibrant color of coral, but with an impossible shine to it. The sun, almost, but it was wrong to compare the two for the sun had no life in its ceaseless burning and, opposed to that, the woman seemed to glow with life. Burning with life.

And she had two legs, which were obscured by flowing cloth that reminded him of the elegance of jellyfish.

There wasn't anything abnormal about that as most humans, all humans as far as Ben were aware, had these limbs to aid their lives through walking and jumping. Just as fish had their tails to swim through the dark, cold depths of the ocean.

But, as he watched her climb out to the edge of the rocky coast, skirt hiked up to let her feet and calves dangle into the foamy water, Ben desperately wished he had the former as well.

He bobbed down into the green water, breathing in with the familiar feeling of his gills fluttering as his body adjusted to submersion. The soft waves overhead blurred the distant vision of her, but her bright hair was a beacon against the dull, grey-blue sky.

Ben had always lived on the coast of Maine. He knew that's another way he's failed as a merman- Exploration and wanderlust should flow right beside blood in his veins- But the choppy, cold waters were all he knew, and they weren't truly unpleasant. That's what he would tell anyone if they would ask him.

But when he was just a boy, smothered in far more than what could be considered baby fat and with a tail disgustingly grey and translucent, he'd spotted a girl on the beach. A girl with the most beautiful, long red hair. And while she frantically ran, a moment of freedom, with a sort of desperate need to find something, something that Ben wondered if anyone could find, she noticed him. She noticed him and they didn't know each other, never had seen the other before, and he was weird and she was beautiful, but she smiled, unmistakable even in the distance. And for the first time in his life, he'd believed that maybe these waters could be home, that anywhere could.

Ben would rather go swimming with a shark than say it aloud, but the words rattled around in his heart nonetheless.

He had never seen that girl again, till a lifetime passed and he was, somehow, thin and muscular and she was there and practically the same while entirely different.

The water was murky that day, so he took the risk of getting close. Only a few feet away, he could make out details he never did. Like the soft curves of her cheekbones, and her eyes, which were such a striking greyish green. An intensity within them that he could almost imagine they were focused on him.

She tensed and her hands moved from her lap to marbled black and grey rocks she sat upon. She moved smoothly into the ocean waves, a sharp pale and pink contrast against the stone and water.

He was close enough to touch her. Far too close. He folded his tail underneath him, the yellow fin ready to propel him away at a moments notice.

Suddenly, she twisted, arm quickly diving into the water, grabbing his arm and wrenching him into the cold, dry air.

He gasped, ironically like a fish out of water, trying to adjust to the use of lungs, his tail awkwardly trying to give him support in the shallows. Failing, Ben found himself relying on the woman's tight grip on his arm, the woman who was *talking* to him and looking at him with a startling amount of rage but her voice sounded like

crashing waves and the beautiful murmur of a conch shell and he hadn't heard a word, had he?

Crouched at half her height, he stared up into her face, silhouetted by the sun, an almost blinding halo around her.

"What?" Ben asked shakily.

Her frown faded, squinted eyes relaxing as she raised an eyebrow. Then, she let go of his arm.

He barely caught himself, his other arm shooting out at the sandy floor to do so, the tip of his nose dipping into the water. Beneath the murky surface, his tail floundered in the water to get any sort of balance against the unfamiliar ground.

"I said," she repeated slowly, her hands now resting on her hips, "You shouldn't be stalking a woman from behind a rock, asshole. Anyone, actually, stalking anyone is generally frowned upon!"

"Oh!" he exclaimed. Finally he managed to balance, and stood up. And had to look down, being nearly a head taller than her. He crouched, shoulders turned inward to his broad chest. "Sorry, I didn't intend to, I didn't mean any harm."

Her frown deepened. "Sure. It doesn't matter if you didn't mean any, if you still did it." Feeling a bit bad for the man who now greatly resembled a kicked puppy, despite her own want to hold onto her indignation, she added, "But you're sorry, and I suppose that's a start."

She lifted herself back onto the rock again, shivering in the air. While the sun was still bright in the sky, it was low over the horizon, and the night winds were beginning to awaken. She offered Ben a hand, and he took it like a lifeline.

There was a beat of silence, and nothing moved, save the gentle rock of the waves.

"Are- Are you going to get onto the rock?" She asked, eyes jumping from their interlocked hands to Ben's face, which was turning scarlet at a shocking pace. He quickly let go of her hand.

"No, no, I'll stay in the water. It's, uh, really nice."

She looked at him in disbelief. "Really?" He nodded.

"Well, if you get hypothermia, I can tell the police I warned you." She smiled, just a small crook of her lips, and yet it was still far more blinding than the sun behind her. "I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name?"

"Oh, I'm Ben," he mumbled, shrugging his shoulders slightly.

"Just Ben?" she asked, a cheeky smile on her face.

"Yeah, one name's enough for me. And who might you be, Miss...?"

Her face fell. "It's Mrs, actually. Beverly, Beverly Rogan." She stuttered over the surname, barely perceptible to Ben, and after she smiled once more, but it was a sad facsimile of before.

There was a moment of quiet, not unnatural or awkward, just two quiet people in the quiet of nature, pretending not to watch each other as they did so. The length of time lasting just long enough for Beverly née Marsh to decide that Ben was, frankly, unfairly attractive, among other things.

After that point of time had been reached, Beverly, in a sort of jerky motion that was at odds with both the stillness of the rocks and horizon, as well as the rhythmic pull and push of the waves, lifted her hand from where it lay on her lap to glance at her wristwatch.

She jumped immediately, letting out a yelp of shock. Ben jerked back, too, eyes dancing across the water and beach for anything frightening, gaze quickly jumping down to where his tail was still underwater, all-but invisible below the surface.

"I- I have to go," she explained, though, to Ben, the words didn't seem particularly directed at him. "I'm sorry," she said, and the words seemed rehearsed, recited off a script.

Ben shook his head, attempting to show a lack of offense he thought words would ruin, but Beverly was too busy stumbling back to the rocky beach, slipping her shoes and socks onto her still wet feet. As

she ran, she looked back once, only once, and, unsure what to do, he waved goodbye.

Her shoulders shook, and the distant shadow of her keeled over, and it took Ben a moment to realize she was laughing. Ben had, he was well aware, been laughed at quite a bit in his life. Not in recent years, but back when he was still young, and lived with others in far deeper waters. But that laughter, which had cut deep back then, seemed alien to hers. When she finally left, after waving back, he found himself hoping that wherever she was going back to, it would be with someone who would make her laugh as well.

Ben stood there for a long while, the unfamiliar stance almost comfortable, with his hand raised in farewell, before it got too tired and he let it down. Then, when the sun set and it was too dark to see, and the wind felt less like an irritant and more like a whip, he slipped below the water, and swam off.

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Beverly came back. In fact, she almost returned like clockwork. Ben wasn't familiar with clocks or time- a side effect of living in the ocean- but he knew of it. The beach was 'closed' at 'eight', which he found odd, because he wasn't sure how you could restrict so many people from such a popular place, or why eight, as it seemed such a small number to him. But it didn't seem to bother Beverly, as she would steadily make her way up the black and cream of the beach long after people had left it, right as the sun would begin to drop in the sky.

She came back once, then twice, and while three makes a pattern, Ben finally came aware on the fourth beach visit that this seemed to be a new, common occurrence.

They didn't talk much; When Beverly came back for a second time, she had been surprised to find Ben there, and had asked if he was stalking her, mostly joking. He had anxiously informed her he lived nearby, which was only partially a lie, and that he could leave if she wanted. She said no, and Ben was thankful, on the account that he enjoyed the beach very much, and enjoyed her presence even more. Also, he wasn't entirely sure how he would have left without

magically growing a pair of legs or swimming away into the ocean, which would undoubtedly be both worrying and confusing for a human to watch.

On that fourth visit, which proved a turning point on their interactions, Ben was the one who instigated a conversation. He asked her why she, too, had started coming to the beach, as he hadn't seen her here before. She softly told him, after a moment, that she had moved back to Maine just recently, and had been waiting for an opportunity to visit the coast. Ben wondered if she remembered when she had come there when she was younger. Or perhaps he was entirely wrong, as it had been years ago, and time had blurred the memory as it often does. It didn't bother Ben in the slightest, he supposed that if the girl and her were one, it was luck, and if they were two, he owed that girl more thanks than he could hold in his heart.

And Beverly simply wondered if the soft lines of Ben's face were truly familiar, or if her mind had falsified it, in the hope of a relationship not tied up in painful strings.

The silence didn't return as it had before.

"So, you're a clothing designer?"

"Yes. I have my own line, actually," she replied, and she didn't say *but my husband seems to think it's his, and I'm not sure how long I'll be able to disagree.*

"That's incredible," he said earnestly.

"Not really," she mumbled, picking at a piece of stone lodged into a crevice.

"I'm sorry, what did you say you do?" Beverly asked, and she thought he might be an artist, because he seemed the type, quiet and thoughtful.

"A few things here and there. Fishing, mainly," Ben answered quickly, and he wanted to tell her, *I'm not like you, and you deserve to know, but I can't, I'm selfish in that.*

“Oh! Do you like it?”

“Uh, yeah. A lot of time away from home, though,” he supplied, thinking of the boats that he would watch cut through the waves above him, spending days stealing away the silvery clouds of fish. Permanently forcing them deeper into the ocean, far more than what could be considered comfortable. It was unfair, but he found he couldn’t hold ill will against them. Ben imagined they were feeding their own families as well, and he stole from their traps too.

“Anyone at home?” As Beverly said it, she knew the words were too fast as they left her lips. The question had lingered in the forefront of her mind for reasons she couldn’t, or didn’t dare, name, ready to slip out the second they were able.

Ben shook his head, dipping it with a bit with a smile. “My folks live pretty far south. Couldn’t handle the cold, I guess.” Once more, it wasn’t quite a lie, he justified, just an avoidance of the truth.

Beverly leaned forward, closer to where Ben floated in the water, resting her head upon her manicured hand. “I don’t blame ‘em. Maine winters suck,” she laughed. “I’ve always wanted to travel. Get far away from here.” She paused. Looked down towards the ground. Rubbed the golden band encircling her finger. “Guess it didn’t work. What about you? Not the type for warm weather?”

“I’d... I’d like to travel too,” he admitted.

“Why not, then?” she said. “If you pardon me asking?

“Haven’t had a reason to, I suppose,” replied Ben, but even he found the words fake.



The days managed to get colder, somehow. Frost hadn’t come yet, and wouldn’t for a long while, Ben guessed, and Beverly supposed for at least a few months.

The talks, which consisted more of a pleasant sharing of company than talking, continued.

Beverly spoke mostly that evening.

"I lived pretty close by when I was little, believe it or not," she said. "I used to come out to these rocks all the time. I- I hated it here, honestly." *I still do.* "I used to think about just diving into the water, swimming off into the distance, going to new and exotic places." *I still do.* "Or maybe just Nova Scotia. I heard you can swim there. Just... Not fucking Maine." She sighed bitterly. "Kids are pretty dumb, right?"

Ben waited for her to continue. When the silence continued, he answered, "I don't think so."

She shook her head. "Maybe. But, the thing is, I missed this damn beach. I don't know why. I just wanted to go into the water, one last time. But it never felt right as a kid. And it still doesn't. So I don't bother. And I continue to feel like shit." She ducked her head, stray curls masking her twisting features. "I really want a cigarette right now."

Ben rested his hand atop hers, an attempt at consolation. Her hand, shaking slightly, which Ben suspected wasn't from the cold, curled inwards, but didn't pull away. He ran his thumb over the even peach flesh, trying to not brush against the patches of concealer, not wanting to destroy the thin layer hiding the blossoming purple beneath.

"Aren't you going to ask me why I don't just do it? Why I'm not satisfied?"

"I don't think I have a right to," he said finally. She silently agreed.

She twisted her hand gently, out of his grip which had immediately loosened, and she instead threaded her fingers in his. Ben's lower half still lay in the water, but his upper half rested on the beach. She leaned forward, her head dropping on his stiff shoulder. He lifted his other hand, rubbing a calming pattern on her back. It felt like a dream.

From beneath Ben's warm hand, her wedding ring glittered threateningly.

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Ben decided after that meeting he was going to give her something. He wasn't sure what, his mind fluttering from possibility to possibility, but he would.

A poem! A declaration of (love) affection. They had rules, and Ben was good with rules, and they required thought and time and it would be perfect, wouldn't it? But he had no paper, no pencil or pen, not even a smooth surface, and Ben doubted he could even manage a steady hand.

What did humans desire that he could dream to hold? What could he give to the woman who has captured his every thought?

An idea struck his mind. He remembered a night a few years back, when the blackened sky was bright with a full moon, and he was awoken by cackling. Two men slipped over onto the rocky shore, laughing like banshees, and sound was ugly but it was earnest and undeniably good. After what felt like a short time, the one with dull rusty hair fell to his knees in front of the other. He drew out a ring, and the dark haired one laughed, and then went deadly quiet, and then began to cry, and Ben would have thought a painful blow had been dealt to him if it weren't for the grin splitting his face. Ben slid back under the water as the brunette pulled the kneeling man into his arms. He realized the sight wasn't meant for anyone but the two lovers.

A ring? It was a good idea, Ben thought, but the men were in love. He couldn't- He couldn't give Beverly something with such weighty symbolism resting on its shoulders, the expectation of- Something. Love? A unification? Marriage? All three? She was married herself, damnit, a golden loop glittered on her left hand finger, and he wouldn't dare- At best, Beverly and him were friends.

But jewelry was a smart way to go. Perhaps earrings? No, no, if one was lost the other was worthless. That left a necklace of pearls, and he wondered why it wasn't the first thing to cross his mind.

He wouldn't make a big deal out of it, Ben decided. That would be awkward, and- No. He just wanted her to have something to brighten

her day. Maybe, if he slipped it into her purse, yes, the white bag embroidered with flowers that she routinely abandoned by the edge of the water, she wouldn't even know it was him. But would her husband notice the new piece of jewelry and question where it came from? Or, the far more likely option, Beverly would realize it was him. Would she hate him, consider it a boundary crossed?

He shook his head, bubbles filling his vision with the action. *I need to stop thinking*, he decided.

He spent the night shucking clams. When he at last rested, the ocean's clear ceiling was just beginning to glow with the sun's radiance, and his dreamless sleep was pervaded with the faint scent of lilac and nail polish.

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Ben slipped it into the pocket of her purse without trouble. They had sat far out in the water that night, like they had when they first met. Beverly cross-legged on a lone rock, Ben sitting against it, head tilted back to watch her. At one point, Beverly had gestered emphatically in the middle of a thrilling tale of rumors and revenge and Black Friday sales, and the purse had gone toppling into the water surrounding it. He'd reached out, grabbing it before it could reach its watery grave, and slipped the pearls from where they were tangled around his fingers into its opened flaps.

He returned to his place, and she didn't comment. He let out a breath, and considered it a sigh of relief.

"Are you planning to ever tell me you're a mermaid?" Beverly said, very softly.

He choked on the exhale. "What?"

"Or is it merman? I'm not quite sure," she mused. Ben turned around so quickly the motion was accompanied with a splash, a little wave managing to rock above the stone she sat upon, soaking the edges of her leggings. He seemed unsure what to say in the face of accusation, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

"Yes- It's merman, I- How long have you known?" he said guilty. Asking her how she found out seemed stupid. He supposed the discovery was inevitable, she was smart, wicked smart, but regardless his insides felt as if they were shriveling up.

"One of the first few times, I don't really remember. I dare to think I knew from the start, just thought it was too impossible. You never leave the water and when you stretch I can see the scales on your stomach," Beverly replied.

A moment of silence passed, and she sighed.

"I'm not mad- Okay, maybe I'm a little mad, I just wished you would have told me," she said.

"I thought you would leave," Ben replied. "I mean, this isn't normal, I'm not exactly normal."

"I would have rather known," Beverly snapped, the words heated.

"I'm sorry."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "It's fine. Just promise you won't lie to me about something this big again," she implored, and even if for some awful reason he wanted to, Ben knew every fiber in his being could not refuse.

"I swear, Beverly."

It was quiet, after that, save the never ending crash of waves. The seabirds had already fled for warmer weather, their absence plenty welcome. The silence was far from comfortable, but there was a weight lifted from both of their shoulders.

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Beverly found the string when she went home, unpacking her bag onto the grey comforter of the King she shared with Tom. It tumbled from her loop of keys as she pulled it out, lying splayed as splotches of cream on the dark surface. She took it in her hand: The pearls were of slightly different shapes and sizes, not all perfectly uniform in color, but pretty nonetheless. Strung together on a thin, flaxen,

waxed string, like a tiny bit of rope.

It wasn't perfect, but it was unique, untraditionally beautiful, and it was for *her*. She considered how it got there, but there was only one likely culprit: Ben.

She slipped it under the mattress. The following morning, after Tom left for work, she put it around her neck. Every so often, her hand would drift up to the pearls, and she would rub the imperfect spheres, the rough cord, and smile to herself.

But the goodness didn't last. In Beverly's experience, it never had.

She planned to take the necklace off when Tom came home. But he was already there. And he saw the pretty string of pearls.

He asked her where she'd got it, and she said that she bought it with her friends, and he said, *no, she hasn't been out with her friends for a long time, she's been at home*, and he asks *if a man bought it for her*, and she thinks of her father asking that same question about the bracelets she spent the last remnants of her pocket money on, and how she denied it and he said *yes, yes she did*, and *what do the boys have that he doesn't*, and the sick, sick rhetorical question goes on just a second too long on and Beverly feels that there is an answer but she doesn't know it so this time she doesn't bother denying it.

He slaps her. She can't tell if that's what made her feel sick, or the pooling feeling of thankfulness that slapping her is all he did, or the memory of her father's knobby hands.

She heard the sound of the toilet flushing. Tom stomped away to sulk in the bedroom, empty handed. She'll sleep on the couch tonight, his idea of punishment, and that's the most pleasant thing she's had to consider since she came home. But it doesn't dull the rage building in the empty spot in her chest. That he won't let her have the single thing that brought her the slightest bit of joy, just a shred of dignity.



Ben doesn't see her for a week.

When he finally sees her, he notices how thickly caked her makeup

is. He doesn't say anything.

They talk about silly, empty things like the weather and celebrity news that Ben is vaguely acquainted with, and he nods when he's truly lost, and lets her ramble on.

Sometime after a discussion of the stocks in her fashion line, she ends up in his arms. She doesn't cry, and he doesn't do anything beyond hold her, both soft and supportive. Half of him is still beneath the waves, and her legs still rest on the shore, and the water coating his skin seems like a barrier she fears she will never be able to cross.

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A month passed. Then Beverly invited Ben to lunch. She said it nonchalantly, while she chewed at the nail of her turquoise ring finger, but he didn't notice. His mind was too alight with surprise and glee and worry. They'd never met in proper daylight before.

She didn't say that her husband was out of town, but the implication kept violently raising its ugly head. He wanted to say that *you shouldn't be married to someone you have to hide your life from out of fear and let me help you*, but Ben knew that Beverly knew the former all too well, and felt he could never live up to the promise of the latter.

Beverly asked in jest if it would be too boring if they met here, and Ben laughed and disagreed. Beyond that, their conversation was a blur: Beverly insisted on bringing the food, as she had brought the luncheon up- Ben protested till he recalled humans didn't eat raw fish.

They had set the meeting for one in the afternoon. He didn't know when that was, but the time till then felt endless, regardless of any numerical value.

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Ben went to the shore the second he awoke, but she was already there. A red-white checkered blanket set on the dusty pale yellow sand, and Beverly rested there, leaning upon a wooden basket and

gazing out towards the horizon. Her red hair was mostly hidden under a large, white sun hat, loops of it emerging to frame her face. The red dress she wore spread across the length of the blanket, and her pale knees peeked out only to fold back underneath the waves of the dress. Pale green heels rested half buried in sand, the rest tucked up under the cloth of her purse.

He swam up quickly, arms parting the dark water, as his head bobbed up into vision by the beach. She blinked in surprise, before tilting her hat in mock-greeting, with a bubbly laugh.

“Sorry, wasn’t sure of the time,” Ben said, panting slightly.

“It’s okay,” Beverly replied, a smile playing at her lips. She frowned, suddenly, almost cartoonishly. “Wait, you don’t exactly have access to a clock, do you?”

“Nope,” he admitted.

“Shit.”

He finally reached the shoreline, meeting the warmth of the sand, which to his hands and forearms and stomach. He shifted up on his arms, laying opposite to Beverly, his tail swishing anxiously in the water behind him.

She arched an eyebrow. “Are you planning to get out of the water?”

“I- If it’s alright, it’s really nice in here.”

“Come on! No one’s around. I know you have a tail, it can’t get more shocking than that.”

Ben considered, probably for far too long, before finally slithering out of the water. He had tried to avoid this, out of a latent fear of mockery, but he supposed he had no reason. He had shed his childhood scales, much like his weight, and his fins had at least grown in, he supposed.

His tail looked odd, out of water. The trunk was bright yellow, far too bright against the desaturated grains of sand, the occasional white patch sticking out obviously in the harsh sun. The blue fins laid

limply against gravity. He flexed the weak muscles, watching them twitch helplessly before lying once more against the rocks beneath them, and frowned. He noticed that she was right- Patches of yellow scales did spread with sporadic frequency up to his navel.

“Okay, it’s a bit shocking,” she remarked. The man shook his head, a self-deprecating smile on his face. Ben was... Unbelievable, as a person alone, respectful and thoughtful and kind, but this was like something out of a fairytale to Beverly. Quite literally, she supposed, but the Little Mermaid couldn’t hold a candle to Ben. Her tail was a muted green, and badly animated in the second dimension; Ben was three dimensional and real and his tail was painted like a summer sky.

Beverly wanted to tell him so, but she didn’t have the words to. Even more so, she wanted to run her hands against the shiny scales, but was sure that was a boundary that shouldn’t yet be crossed. When they first met, he hadn’t reached out, run his hands against her bare legs, up her thighs- *Okay, time for another train of thought.*

She stood up straight, stretching her arms, back arched, letting out a little pleased sigh at the release in tension. She had spent all morning trying to prepare lunch. She wasn’t good at cooking, and didn’t have any particular passion for it, but she wanted to try anyway. All she ended up with was burnt bruschetta (taking its final resting place in her garbage disposal) and a surplus of ugly sandwiches.

Beverly unpacked the woven backset: Two small plates of peanut butter and jelly mini-sandwiches, an urgently bought and replated collection of mozzarella wrapped in various deli meats, a bowl of strawberries, and jug of homemade lemonade.

Ben’s brown eyes were as wide as saucers. At the sight, she joked, “We can order pizza, if it’s too bad.”

“Beverly,” he murmured. “This is... Incredible.”

“Well, I hope you aren’t disappointed by the taste, then,” she said.

Beverly grabbed a sandwich and took a bite, watching as Ben took a mozzarella stick with a tentative air. He took a nibble, then, with a

grin, ate the rest in a gulp. She matched his smile, removing her sun hat, attempting to fold it into her purse. A pale edge of the brim poked out through a gap in the zippered opening.

He reached for a sandwich as well, and with a sudden thought, she grabbed his wrist. She felt the hard muscle caught mid-flex beneath, the gentle tickle of hair, the salt beginning to encrust his skin. In a second, her brain seemed to truly register that she was reclining on a near-empty beach with a barely-clothed man, her husband she no longer loved (and perhaps never did) out of state on a business trip. She accepted it, then the thought was pushed from her mind, letting go of his hand in a swift motion.

“Sorry, are you allergic to peanut butter?”

Ben gazed up at her. He shook his head as he spoke, “What? I mean, no, I don’t think so.”

“Really? You don’t sound too confident there,” Beverly said with a doubting look.

“I, uh, haven’t had it,” he admitted sheepishly.

Her face lit up. “*Oh my god.* Of course! We have to change that fact.” She grabbed a sandwich, placing in his still outstretched hand, after carefully opening his palm. With a bit of concern, she added, “We’ll just have to watch for symptoms for a few minutes. But that *really* isn’t going to happen.”

Ben did as he was bid, looking a bit disturbed, taking a bite, Beverly watching him, enraptured in his reaction. It tasted... boring, Ben thought. Mostly the flat taste of something with the texture of mud, with a hint a saccharine-sweet fakeness. He tried to give her a grin.

“Not too bad,” he said.

She threw a fist in the air, as if in victory. “Yes! I can’t believe you lived without them.” She popped one whole in her mouth. Chewing and swallowing, she continued, “They’re practically a childhood staple.”

“Well, the ocean doesn’t exactly make for prime sandwich making

territory,” he joked, and almost instinctively reached forward to wipe at the splotch of jam smudged on the corner of her mouth.

He froze, his hand floating besides her freckled cheek. “I’m sorry, I-”

She reached up, thin fingers wrapping around his calloused hand. Even the waves seemed to quiet in that moment.

She leaned forward, and pressed her lips against his. He tasted like the sea, salty, cool, though not unpleasantly. Strong. Stubble brushed against her cheeks.

She pulled away, slowly, and Ben remained unmoving, his eyes wide, his mouth still parted slightly.

“I’m sorry,” she stuttered out, just like him moments before. “I know I’m still married, and I don’t know if you- I assumed-”

Finding his words, Ben choked out: “Beverly.”

Now it was her turn to gaze; at the slight twist of his thick eyebrows, the way his tongue darted out to lick his lips, how the deep, dark pools of his eyes went down to the checkered pattern of the blanket, to the waves behind him, and at last her face, almost pleading.

“Can I kiss you?”

And she couldn’t help but laugh. A slight, breathy sound, the release of years of feeling alone and trapped at the same time, the sound of light shining in at the end of the tunnel, and in that moment she felt that soulmates must exist. She nodded, throwing her arms around his neck with a smile.

This time, his lips met hers. Ben felt that he could kiss her till the end of time and never be satisfied. Her hands curled themselves in the wet tangles of hair at the base of his neck, fingernails scraping against his scalp. His arms encircled her, in a comforting embrace rather than a possessive hold.

They broke off, still close enough their noses brushed against the others, lost in their own thoughts. Ben’s mind was running, running with thoughts of impossible dreams and possible nightmarish

endings, and the thought that they were doomed, because they were as separated as land and sea, and that he should leave, and not drag her life down, but it was her choice, and that if she would dare, it would be his greatest sadness in the end and his greatest joy for all the moments in between.

And Beverly, who's eyes had fluttered shut, was chasing after a memory just out of her reach, trying to see the pictures hiding behind her eyelids.

As if sensing her internal conflict, Ben's arms loosened around her. A hand came up, gently rubbing her thin shoulder. "We can stop, if you want?" he said, thinking of bruises on her past wrists far more than anything else.

She shook her head, however she pulled his hand from her upper arm. Her features were twisted with something- An expression between deep sadness and distress and confusion.

"I- I have something I need to do," she mumbled. She stood up, quickly, stumbling back, as if her mind was too caught up in its thoughts (or revelations, but Ben was not privy to know that) to assist in the motions of walking. Absentmindedly, she grabbed her heels from their offhand resting place, but didn't bother putting them on. As she ran over the edge of the beach, out of Ben's sight, she left only her shallow footprints and purse. He prayed she would return for him as well as it.

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Beverly ignored the pain of the hot, rough pavement against her feet, instead focusing on how many doors till her house- Their house- No, Tom's house. He'd chose it, bought it, she supposedly decorated it but every idea got shot down at least twice before the final design- Yes, it was Tom's house and his alone. Vaulted windows, and a tall, wide, iron door, the grey house was as intimidating as it was ugly. She used to feel dwarfed by it; now it seemed more akin to the corpse of a giant beast. Frightening at first, but in reality, empty, lifeless, and unthreatening.

The house was empty of Tom Rogan, and if he wasn't, she felt she

could have vanquished that beast as well.

Beverly threw open the door, having not locked it in the first place. She walked through the white walled hallway, devoid of pictures or paintings. She seemed possessed as she made her way to the master bedroom, or perhaps like the ghost herself.

There were two closets in the room they shared. One on the far end of the room, a walk-in closet filled with dresses and shoes Beverly rarely wore. The other, just left of the hallway door, with three neatly hung up suits, a single beige hat- And a safe.

The safe was thick and wide and black as night. It held the important bills, Beverly was told. Passports and stock certificates and all sorts of things she was told *not to worry her pretty little head over*.

“Oh, fuck you,” she breathed, if only for her own satisfaction, for wasn’t that reason enough?

It was locked, of course, but life had granted Beverly the skill to deal with that, or rather forced her to require it. The loss of hairpin had left a lock of her hair curling in her vision, but it didn’t obscure the silvery grey mass lying in the bottom of the metal box.

Her sealskin was like the sky at twilight: Blue fading into black with shiny spots like the stars. She ran a hand over it- The double sensation of her fingers trailing gently, softly, lovingly over her skin so unfamiliar after all those years.

Beverly buried her face into the soft fur and cried. Cried tears for her lost years. Cried for the men who’d controlled her and hurt her, and stolen her skin. Cried for how her home was stolen from her both physically and in her mind, and the wet taste of salt on her lips made the pain desperately stronger. Cried for how overwhelmed she felt, the underwater memories that seemed to drown her, alone in a sea of emotions, but she was *free*. She thought the tears would never stop coming.

But they did, eventually. She stood, from where she had knelt, and held her skin within her shaking arms.

As she left the house, she dropped her marriage band in the garbage disposal. And, as an afterthought, threw her heels in the trash.

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Beverly appeared over the rocky shore like a dawning red sun, mirroring how the real planet sunk into the blue-black sea opposing her, leaving streaks of pink that seemed to keep faint light on the beach until she returned. Ben, who had chosen to rest under the water as he waited, the dryness of his scales having grown to too unpleasant, lifted his head from his forearms at the sight of her. With the back of his hand he wiped cool sand from his cheek, leaning up, arching his back to see her.

She had something cradled in her arms, large and- fluid? It was hard to guess from the distance, but it seemed to bulge in her arms, threatening to slip off onto the ground, swaths of it dropping where it managed to get over her lean arms.

She spotted him, and began moving a bit faster, nimbly jumping over the rocks dotting the coastline, walking past their abandoned picnic to come over to where he half-lay in the sand.

"I thought you wouldn't be here. It's practically night," she quickly said. Worry and surprise painted her face. Her mascara was streaked, her makeup half rubbed off; Ben could see the freckles she hid peeking out from beneath, like sand sprinkled across her cheeks.

"I didn't want to not be here if- When you came back. Are you alright?"

She didn't respond. He looked her up and down, scanning for any sort of visible injury, but found none. Instead his eyes wandered again to the object in her arms: A smooth grey fabric. A skin, in fact, he realized, with slick fur and fins, whole as could be, with a pale belly speckled with spots both dark and light.

A freckled seal skin in the arms of the freckled woman who loved the coast, the sea. The picture clicked into place.

Ben couldn't help but speak as his brain tried to catch up with his

heart. "You have- You're a-"

"Selkie, yeah," Beverly finished quietly for him. "I guess it's why I could never-" She sighed. Her face slipped into a deep sadness, but one without tears, and it quickly toughened to stone. Her mouth was a thin line, her copper brows furrowed. "No. It doesn't matter. It's all in the past now."

For the first time since their meeting, all those months ago, she made her way into the water. Ben pushed himself back a little, to give her more room both physically and, he hoped, emotionally. But instead, she grabbed his arm to steady her descent, and he moved no more, save the gentle flicking of his tail, a shadow beneath the dark water. One foot still planted, sinking into the wet sand, the other hesitantly lifted above the slowly lapping waves. First a single toe, tentatively, then her foot, her calf, and then her whole left leg, obscured by the floating red expanse of her sundress.

She giggled, and he couldn't help but laugh too, if only because he felt as out of his depths as she.

"You were right, actually, it is pretty nice in here," she said on a breath, and he wheezed in reply, and she started to laugh again as well.

Beverly let go of his arm, almost falling in as she continued to laugh, her free arm catching her balance in the push and pull of the water, which splashed up at her and darkened her dress. While one of her hands was occupied with holding her sealskin, the other continued to run through the waves. She splashed some on her face, the last dedicated smudges of remaining makeup running off, and her chest, and then some in the air with a joyful cry, where it rained down on both of them, a glittering deluge. It stuck to her hair and face in diamond drops, the light spots to match her dark freckles. She pulled the tie from her bun, chucking it into the depths as her hair fell down to her shoulders.

Suddenly solemn once more, her hand once again returned her grey coat. She held it by the shoulders, letting it hang freely, empty as it was. The seal head lulled as she brought it beneath the waves- It seemed to take life in that moment, the currents giving it the

appearance of a seal simply sleeping, or maybe that was simply the touch of Beverly. She tucked one leg into it than another, pulling it up her bottom half with a few gentle tugs. Her hands hovered under the water's surface, over the floating edge of her dress, which she gathered in her hands. In a smooth motion she pulled the red fabric over her head.

Ben turned his head away quickly, but in a moment her hand came to his stubbly cheek, turning him back to face her.

Her freckles, it turned out, spread to her shoulders and chest, continuing down into her robin blue underclothes, which she was carefully unclipping. The bra fell from her shoulders, and in that moment they were matched, creatures of the water, free as the day of their birth.

"I hope you know, I'm not... Proposing anything right now," she said.

"Of course," he answered immediately. She gave a little smile, grey eyes flickering up to his, trusting, and tucked a piece of hair behind her shoulders.

The skin moved of its own accord now, or at least of Beverly's, returning to its rightful place. Her tail stretched up the jutting of her hips, to stop where the softness of her stomach. One flipper ran tenderly up her body to rest between her chest, her coat following it, the fin stretching to hold to the edge of her collarbone. The other, Ben guessed, mirrored its path in between her shoulder blades, sticking out to sway in the water.

"I haven't felt like this in... A long time," she said quietly, and Ben got the feeling she wasn't truly speaking to him, simply needing to speak.

She moved closer to him, smoothly through the water, a hand coming to rest of his bare shoulder. He couldn't help but be surprised when she didn't continue with the passionate kissing they had began hours ago, instead wrapping her arms around him in a tight hold, but took the intimate embrace she gave him in stride. He lifted an arm, hugging her not too tightly to his chest. She nuzzled her face into his chest, a toothy smile gracing her face.

"Ben," Beverly breathed, "how do you feel about going some place warm?"

"Nothing sounds better," he replied. He didn't say that he would follow her anywhere, because he got the feeling she already knew.

They held each other for a long time. When the darkness proved so severe that they couldn't see each other, Ben showed Beverly where he had always slept, his empty, open home. She showed him how she used to float on the rocking surface of the waves, with her mother, and she didn't entirely remember but the knowledge felt right, but the thought of doing it once more felt a bit wrong. They slept somewhere in between, cradled by the water surrounding them, high enough to avoid the tangles of seaweed and low enough to be hidden from the sun's rays.

They found warmth in each others arms that night.

**Author's Note:**

I hope you enjoyed, comment if you did! I think I may add more to this au, but considering how long this took and the fact I haven't updated toothy little things (I haven't forgotten it, I swear), that may take a long while.